

“What Strange Gifts We Bring”
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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Isaiah 60:1-6
Matthew 2:1-12

What was the strangest gift you got this Christmas? If you want to type it in the comments, you can do so— it will be good for you to hear from one another, and I would like to later check to see what you wrote. I won't tell you what my strangest gift was, just in case the gift giver might be listening. But in one former church where I worked, they had a group that tried to do a monthly dinner, rotating in people's homes. At Christmas, we would always have a White Elephant Gift Exchange. If you've never participated in this ritual, basically you give a cost limit that everyone must follow— like \$5-\$10— and everyone brings a wrapped gift to the party. Then, numbers are randomly picked, according to the number of people at the party. The highest number gets to pick the first gift and unwrap it. The next person can either steal that gift, or pick a different, wrapped gift to open, and so forth. If your gift gets stolen, you can either steal someone else's gift, or pick another wrapped gift under the tree. It's best to have the lowest number, so that you can pick last. The way we played in Chicago, no one gift can get stolen more than three times, but I understand the rules to the game and even the name of the game differs regionally. At my Chicago church, each year the gifts would get more outlandish, and regifting strange things was always met with great approval, especially if it came from your great-aunt's attic. Legend says that the name “white elephant” comes from a certain King of Siam— now called Thailand; when the king was displeased with one of his courtiers, he would give him a rare, albino elephant. It is said that the care and upkeep of these large animals would be the ruin of whoever received it as a gift.

The magi brought strange gifts to Jesus, didn't they? Gold, frankincense, myrrh. What use were these to a baby? How about something practical, like diapers, a teething ring, and a pacifier? I mean, gold could be pretty useful, especially if you have to make an unexpected trip to Egypt to flee a king, Herod, who is trying to kill you. But frankincense and myrrh? I wonder if Mary and Joseph gracefully accepted these strange gifts and then set them aside, not quite sure what they could do with them.

Some say that the magi were likely Persian astrologers and priests who followed a Zoroastrian religion of what is now called Iran. The strangeness of this story, besides the gifts, is that in one encounter so much is brought together: Jew and Gentile; humble stable with smelly animals and wealthy travelers with camels and expensive gifts; men and women— you know, we tend to say “wise men,” but the bible never specifies that it was men. One scholar says that for the culture, a band of men would not come to visit a woman, unless they had women among them. In a tradition that is not written specifically in the bible, at least one wise man is always depicted as black, to show the reach of the gospel beyond the brown people of Jesus's ancient Palestine, to a much wider world.

We might wonder what made the bible consider the magi as “wise.” It does not seem so wise to approach Herod with an announcement that you are looking for the King of the Jews. Even the rest of Jerusalem knew this; Matthew notes that Herod was frightened, and the whole of Jerusalem was frightened with him. This is the kind of ego Herod had: First century historian Josephus reported that Herod was so concerned that no one would mourn his death that he commanded a large group of distinguished men to come to Jericho, and he gave an order that they should be killed at the time of his death so that the displays of grief that he craved would take place; but his son Archelaus and his sister Salome did not carry out this wish.

Herod also had killed his wife and three sons. If he could do that, who would he not kill out of fear or rage? I imagine the night that the magi showed up, each parent hugged their children a little more tightly.

Still, the magi were wise enough to trick Herod on their return journey; they simply went back by another way, to miss Herod and his jealous rage.

British author Jeanette Winterson writes of Epiphany, that it is “an inspired reversal of power structures and hierarchies, of class systems and the status quo, a reminder that the way we live is propositional: we made it this way— we could remake it a different way...The Kings kneel before something bigger than authority— they are kneeling before a possible future, one based on love, not fear; one where there is abundance and not lack.”

Here is what I know. The strange gifts the magi brought were not the expected gifts a baby might need. But they were exactly what Christ needed, and what the church needs, too. Frankincense and myrrh are each derived from a kind of sap. Frankincense was burned for incense and had an anti-inflammatory impact, and myrrh was used as a medicinal ointment¹ which acted as a pain-killing narcotic. Perhaps these gifts foreshadow the kind of death Jesus would endure. The Isaiah passage which Betsy read also prophesied that people will come on camels from the East, bearing gold and frankincense; so perhaps Matthew wanted to draw a link to this prophecy of the Hebrew scriptures, to show that Jesus is the Messiah who was promised in scripture.

The Spirit has given each of us strange gifts, and we have to wonder whether we will keep them to ourselves, or bring them into the light to see what they might mean when shared with others. Under the light of the Bethlehem star, something that may seem useless, ordinary, or weird, could in fact be revealed as a treasure. As a response to the Epiphany story, I asked David Voreacos to give a Minute for Mission, to share about what sharing his gifts for ordained lay leadership has meant to him. Perhaps his words will shed light on what gifts the Spirit has set within your life and called you to share.

¹ Colin Schultz, “There’s More to Frankincense and Myrrh Than Meets the Eye” in *Smithsonian Magazine*, Dec. 24, 2014

